


## THE DWINDLING PRESENCE OF INDIAN

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## UNACCUSTOMED EARTH<sup>59</sup>

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### Abstract

Unlike her earlier works of fiction (*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003)), which mostly explored the identity conflicts and the problems of Indian migrants to travel across cultures, Jhumpa Lahiri's latest collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), can be seen to concentrate more closely on her characters' inner landscapes, thus widening the range of themes to include such intricate and, to a great extent, ethnic-blind topics as death and grief, isolation, family dynamics, and gender relations. Although, migration-related issues and the process of adaptation to a different environment are still integral to this collection, it is also evident that the emphasis has been shifted from the straddling of two cultures to the analysis of

### Resumen

A diferencia de sus obras anteriores (*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) y *The Namesake* (2003)), que indagaban en los conflictos identitarios y los problemas de incorporación de inmigrantes indios a otras culturas, la última colección de relatos de Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), parece centrarse sobre todo en la representación del paisaje interior de sus personajes para abordar temas más complicados y universales como la muerte y el duelo, la soledad, las relaciones hombre-mujer o las que se producen en el entorno familiar. Si bien asuntos relativos a las migraciones y al proceso de integración aún ocupan cierto espacio en este libro, resulta claro que el énfasis se ve desplazado de los choques interculturales a otros de carácter intergeneracional o de género. Este trabajo estudia los cambios que este desplazamiento en los intereses de la

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intergenerational and marital tensions. This article examines the kind of changes that this shift in interest causes both in terms of thematic choices and the treatment those themes receive.

*Key Words:* Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, Indian-American Fiction, second generation migrants, thematic criticism.

autora produce tanto en su elección de los temas como en el tratamiento que estos reciben.

*Palabras clave:* Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, literatura indio-americana, segundas generaciones de inmigrantes, aproximación temática.

There are certain intensities to the experience of that first generation and their offspring that don't carry over. I'm aware of my parents' experience, how I grew up and now how my children are growing up. There is such a stark difference in those two generations.

Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interview with *Bookforum*"

In her [Lahiri's] latest work, *Unaccustomed Earth*, a powerful collection of short stories, those [second-generation] children have left home and are starting families of their own, as they struggle both with tangled filial relationships and the demands of parenthood. The straddling of two cultures has been replaced by the straddling of two generations.

Lisa Fugard, "Book review: Divided We Love"

## 1. INTRODUCTORY: ON THE EVOLUTION OF LAHIRI'S FICTION

It is a widely-assumed fact among social scientists and Migration Studies scholars that second-generation immigrants develop a number of ties with the host society that make their experience of their ethnic identity utterly different from that of their parents' (cf. Gordon 1964). Beginning with a more proficient use of the language, but covering almost all facets of cultural, structural, and

civic adaptation, these sons and daughters of migrants are seen to adopt many of the behavioral patterns, values, and ideals of the mainstream group.<sup>60</sup> It would be inaccurate and unfair, though, to affirm that all of them are equally intent on discarding those aspects of their parents' cultural heritage that may make their incorporation into the receiving society more difficult. As Lisa Lowe (1996:65) explains in *Immigrant Acts*, this process usually involves a constant negotiation of the ties they want to strengthen with the host country, the elements of their ethnic cultural background that they wish to preserve, and even those others that they feel need to be modified or fully reinvented. This identity-building process proves especially challenging –and sometimes tortuous– for second-generation immigrants because, while they can rarely achieve a complete assimilation into the host society, they cannot easily identify fully with their ethnic roots or seek the support of their co-ethnics, as their progenitors did.<sup>61</sup> To put it briefly, “the second generation exists in a liminal space of cultural borderlands between the United States [or any other receiving country] and their family's country of origin” (Field 2004:166).

This seems to be the case of many South Asian Americans in particular, who have often been described a “model minority” and who, according to different criteria of assimilation and success, have fared exceedingly well in comparison with other non-white groups (see Portés and Rumbaut 2001). Some specialists claim that the secret of their swift incorporation derives from the importance they grant to education, while others maintain that it is their hard work and determination that have allowed them to overcome the sometimes huge obstacles they have historically faced.<sup>62</sup> Whatever the reasons may be, what seems beyond any doubt is that by the third generation they reach levels of integration into and hybridization with the mainstream society that are only very rarely found among members of other minorities.<sup>63</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction traces the trajectory of a sub-group of South Asian Americans, Bengali immigrants and their offspring, as they struggle with the demands made on

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<sup>60</sup> According to Gordon (1964:51-53), this process of cultural and structural assimilation is affected not only by the degree of ethnic adherence of the group but also by class issues. He coined the term “*ethclass*” to refer to the intersection of these two types of stratification, one horizontal and the other vertical.

<sup>61</sup> Shariff (2008:459) speaks at some length of these difficulties in her article on second-generation South Asian identity as it is portrayed in Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

<sup>62</sup> These obstacles have been addressed both by well-known fiction writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra B. Divakuruni but, also, by cultural and postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Spivak.

<sup>63</sup> Many different indicators have been used by sociologists to measure the patterns and levels of integration but, to mention only a few employed by Portés (1997:814), “the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience of culturally distinct enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages.”

them by their daily routines as American citizens and the conventions and expectations still at work in their own ethnic community. According to Bolonik (2008:34), “Lahiri delves into the souls of indelible characters struggling with displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition and the terror and excitement of the future into which they are being thrust.”

In her earlier works of fiction, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, and *The Namesake* (2003), turned into a memorable movie by filmmaker Mira Nair, Lahiri engages with the difficult issues of establishing a sense of self in a foreign land and deciding which parts of one’s cultural heritage can be successfully integrated into one’s life as an American. In this regard, it is no wonder that most of the life stories contained in these two works should be deeply influenced by the constrictions and the comforts brought over by the first generation of Bengali migrants from their motherland.<sup>64</sup> Even Gogol, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, who was born in Cambridge, MA, and brought up in suburban America, sees his life profoundly marked by events that took place in India before his birth, and the traditions and values of the old country that his parents still rely on to make it good in America:

In so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another. It had started with his father’s train wreck, paralyzing him at first, later inspiring him to move as far as possible, to make a new life on the other side of the world. There was the disappearance of the name Gogol’s great-grandmother had chosen for him, lost in the mail somewhere between Calcutta and Cambridge. This had led, in turn, to the accident of his being named Gogol, defining and distressing him for so many years. He tried to correct that randomness, that error. And yet it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name. His marriage had been something of a misstep as well. And the way his father had slipped away from them, that had been the worst accident of all, as if the preparatory work of death had been done long ago, the night he was nearly killed, and all that was left for him was one day, quietly, to go. And yet these events had formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is. They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end. (Lahiri 2003:287)

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<sup>64</sup> Kuortti (2007:217) argues that Lahiri’s stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies* frequently offer an interpretation of the meaning of hybridity in post-colonial contexts: “It underlines the centrality of cultural translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the present, both chronological and spatial, in a meaningful way”.

There is little question then that, as several critics have pointed out, Lahiri's early works of fiction set out to "delineate the Indian Americans' relationships to their homeland, as well as their responses to immigration and assimilation" (Karim 2006:205). However, it is also evident that unlike other South Asian writers, such as Bharati Mukherjee or Pankaj Mishra, she is not so bent on defining a number of established patterns and shared experiences that would explain the outcomes of those processes. On the contrary, her stories have been praised precisely for their ability to portray the wide variety of the Indian-American immigrant experience and for doing it from all possible angles (cf. Kirpen 1999).

If Lahiri's earlier fiction focused closely on the exploration of themes such as physical displacement, immigration, cultural translation, and self-knowledge, her recent collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), can be said to direct its attention to the more global and timeless topics of death, marital difficulties, parenthood, guilt, and the subjection of women. As the second epigraph to this article underscores, the stories are not so much about the problems derived from the transition from one culture into another but, rather, about the pressures that inevitably come with family responsibilities, understanding one's next of kin or the need to grieve for the loss of a loved one.<sup>65</sup> The reader may be initially misguided by the title of the collection, which is taken from a passage in Hawthorne's well-known and dense preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom-House." After giving some thought to the deep roots that his family had grown in Salem, the father of the romance tradition muses about the unhealthy consequences of that connection:

[...] Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots in unaccustomed earth. (Hawthorne 1967:11)

No doubt the closing phrase in this fragment, which is used as an epigraph to the collection, may be conveniently transformed into a very appropriate metaphor to capture Lahiri's relentless efforts in her fiction to show the experiences of expatriate Bengalis and their American-born children, habitually in the New England area. Nevertheless, although it is true that a great deal of Indian blood still runs through her stories, it soon becomes evident that the adult

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<sup>65</sup> As mentioned earlier on, it is not as if the topics that had engaged all her attention in previous works were utterly neglected in this collection. In fact, Kakutani (2008) notes that her characters are still "navigators of both Bengali and American culture but completely at home in neither; they always experience themselves as standing slightly apart, given more to melancholy observation than wholehearted participation."

second generation is no longer so troubled by the cultural clashes and the identity conflicts that had flustered their parents. The author herself has declared in several interviews that, in this book, “some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made” (Bolonik 2008:134). As she sees the matter, though, this is not something to be regretted, for it is one of the possible –or even probable– outcomes of planting one’s roots in a foreign land. In the story “Hell-Heaven”, for instance, Usha, the young narrator, feels envious of the daughters of an old Indian friend of her family who married a white American woman, Deborah:

Occasionally, they surprised everyone, appearing at a *pūjo* for a few hours with their two identical little girls who barely looked Bengali and spoke only English and were being raised so differently from me and most of the other children. They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same. Because of Deborah, they were exempt from all that, and for this reason I envied them. (Lahiri 2008:75)

*Unaccustomed Earth* is populated by a highly diverse gallery of characters who, as a result of different circumstances –the job they do, the person they’ve married, the place they live in or the company they keep–, are seen to give up many of the customs and values that have governed their parents’ lives. The process of adapting to a different culture is no longer such a fundamental issue for them. They seem to be much more engrossed in questions such as marital (in)fidelity, drug-addiction, alienation or the responsibility for one’s closest kin, which concern most other Americans, regardless of their origin, ethnicity or gender. It is no coincidence, of course, that the facet or vector of social categorization that is not represented on this list is class, which is in fact the dimension in which Lahiri’s characters are most convergent: high middle-class professionals, who are faring quite well in America. In this sense, the author seems to coincide with Appiah’s (2006) views in *Cosmopolitanism* that what really connects individuals across national and ethnic boundaries is their class status. This theorist of culture, however, also admits that the kind of mixtures and syncretism brought about by the expansion of global capital do not necessarily threaten traditional cultures, an idea with which Lahiri is not likely to agree.

## 2. INTERGENERATIONAL AND MARITAL TENSIONS

In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma realizes that she has never had any real communication with her widowed father, who now spends his time making the best of his freedom from any family responsibilities and traveling around Europe, which he had never been to before. But when Ruma invites him to visit her family in their new place in the eastern suburbs of Seattle, a potentially explosive situation is generated. On the one hand, she is afraid that because she and Adam, her husband, have now spare rooms in the house, her father might decide to accept her offer to stay to live with them:

Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move. She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. (7)

On the other hand, because of the aforementioned communication problem between the two, Ruma is not sure she will be able to cope with his criticism of the new direction that her life is taking: "She had never been able to confront her father freely, the way she used to fight with her mother. Somehow, she feared that any difference of opinion would chip away at the already frail bond that existed between them" (37). Predictably, the father-daughter relationship increases in tension during the visit, particularly when Ruma is forced to recognize that her marriage is also stilted or when she discovers that her father is having a secret affair with another Indian woman during his journeys around Europe. Still, the brief sojourn is not without some tender moments of mutual understanding, that allow both characters to come to terms with some feelings that had been tormenting them, especially in connection with their deceased mother and wife, respectively. Helped mainly by three-year-old Akash and the old man's fondness of gardening, the two find ways to come out with some truths that they had foolishly kept for too long from each other:

"These days with Akash have been the greatest gift," he added, his voice softening. "If you like, I can come for a while after you have the baby. I won't be as useful as your mother would have been."

"That's not true."

"But please understand, I prefer to stay on my own. I am too old now to make such a shift." (56)



Michiko Kakutani (2008) remarked in her review of Lahiri's collection that "many of the characters in these stories seem to be in relationships that are filled with silences and black holes." Indeed, it is clear that the relationship between Ruma and her father would have been completely different if, after her mother's unexpected demise, either of them had reached out for the other in search of emotional support and understanding. Yet neither of them takes that first step to speak about the late mother or the brother in the family, or Ruma's difficult marriage and her second pregnancy, or, for that matter, her father's new life as a widower. Very much the same could be argued about the narrator's mother in "Hell-Heaven". Usha conjures up images of the loveless marriage and socio-cultural isolation that her mother must have experienced in Boston when she was a child. Her silent anguish is only partly relieved by the appearance of a young Bengali immigrant, Pranab Chakraborty, another solitary soul, who is accepted as part of the family out of co-ethnic sympathy.<sup>66</sup> What the young narrator could have never guessed is that this lanky-bodied and flaccid-bellied compatriot had afforded her mother the only bright moments in her otherwise dark and sterile existence:

[...] He brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her as happy. I was evidence of her marriage to my father, an assumed consequence of the life she had been raised to lead. But Pranab Kaku was different. He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life. (67)

Of course, when Pranab meets an American student at Radcliffe and begins to bring her over to their place, it does not take long for Usha's mother to show clear signs of resentment. At first, the narrator is unable to understand why her mother should prove so critical and mean toward Deborah, who was polite, well-educated, and much more fun than any of their other friends. When she gets to middle school, though, the reality of her mother's life starts to dawn upon Usha: "I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led. She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me" (76). Straitjacketed in her anachronistic and disempowering cultural values, Usha's mother keeps to herself her own suffering and that fact dooms her to a wasted existence. She only gathers enough courage to reveal the

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<sup>66</sup> It is important to explain, though, that there were a number of earlier connections between Usha's mother and Pranab Kaku which obviously predisposed them to spend time together: "They had in common all the things that she and my father did not: a love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry. They were from the same neighborhood in North Calcutta, their family homes within walking distance, the facades familiar to them once the exact locations were described. They knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-wall for the best jelahis and moghlai parathas" (64).



whole truth to her daughter –a suicidal attempt included– when the latter comes to her recounting how her own heart has been broken by a man she had hoped to marry. All things considered, the reader is not so sure that Usha’s mother real problem is related to the fact that she was born in a distant country, since her experiences replicate those of many US-born women.

“A Choice of Accommodations” also tells the story of a flawed marriage, but in this case it is mixed and it has not been arranged by others. Amit and Megan have been married for eight years and they jump on the opportunity of having been invited to a wedding to drop their two daughters with Megan’s parents and to enjoy a “carefree” weekend. It soon transpires, however, that the couple come to the celebration with too many resentments and insecurities for their exciting prospects to come to their fruition. Grossman (2008) has described Lahiri as “a miniaturist, a microcosmologist” who looks in great detail into her characters’ psychology and invests them with a depth difficult to find in any other contemporary writer. He also observes that most of her characters, like Amit and Megan in this story, are “pulled in at least six directions at once” and this, of course, makes the reading experience much more demanding and ambiguous. In the case of Amit Sankar, there are several chapters of his earlier life that will come alive again when he and his wife reach the grounds of Langford Academy, a boarding school he had attended as a teenager and that now is going to be the setting of an old friend’s wedding. We learn, for example, that he was severely traumatized when his parents dropped him at the school and went to Delhi, where his father had been given a good position in a hospital: “He learned to live without his mother and father, as everyone else did, shedding his daily dependence on them even though he was still a boy, and even to enjoy it. Still he refused to forgive them” (97). It is unclear whether his parents’ untimely abandonment, his unfulfilling professional life, his fondness of solitude or his wife’s successful career should be blamed for the growing distance between the couple, but it is evident that Amit is finding it increasingly difficult to go on with the masquerade:

[...] Megan had not been part of it [their family life]. She lived in the apartment, she slept in his bed, her heart belonged to no one but him and the girls, and yet there were times Amit felt as alone as he had first been at Langford. And there were times when he hated Megan, simply for this. (114)

The occasion of Pam Borden’s wedding seems propitious to having their mutual feelings unburdened, particularly after Amit leaves the party in search of a payphone to call their daughters never to return.<sup>67</sup> However, the next morning

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<sup>67</sup> The author refers on several occasions throughout the story to Amit’s obsessive concern with their two daughters, Maya and Monika, and how he is constantly nagged by the thought that something awful might happen to them: “It was Amit who had studied enough about the body to

they just go back to the school hoping to enjoy a brunch with the rest of the guests. Unfortunately, they arrive too late for the meal. While they are walking around the school dormitories under the rain, Megan finally gets a chance to ask Amit a question that has been itching inside her for a long time:

She took a step toward him, looking at the shirt that clung coldly to his body, then directly into his eyes. “What, then? Something passed between you two, it’s obvious.”

“It was nothing, Meg. We were friends and for a while I had a crush on her [Pam Borden]. But nothing happened. Is that so terrible?”

The information fell between them, valuable for the years he’d kept it from her, negligible now that he’d told. Through the window he saw the workmen in the rain, folding up the chairs and stacking them onto a cart. (125)

Unexpectedly enough, what follows is an erotic and urgent lovemaking scene in one of the students’ dorm rooms which the reader cannot find it easy to decide whether it is spurred on by hunger, resentment or forgiveness. Again, the fact that Amit and Megan are a mixed couple seems of limited relevance to the outcome of their story, since there are other factors related to their jobs, family responsibilities, and past experiences that condition much more decisively their attitudes and behavior. In connection with this idea, Schillinger (2008) notes that “Lahiri [...] shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn’t necessarily the country you’re tied to by blood or birth: it’s the place that allows you to become yourself. This place, she quietly indicates, may not lie on any map.”

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know its inherent fragility, who had dissected enough cadavers to know what a horizontal chest incision would reveal, who was plagued by his daughters’ vulnerability, both to illness and to accidents of all kinds” (90). This excessive concern with his daughters’ safety and well-being may be read as a compensatory drive for some of the other empty spaces in Amit’s life.

### 3. TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES AND ETHNIC-UNSPECIFIC THEMES

“Only Goodness” and “Nobody’s Business” are the most likely candidates in the collection to be anthologized for at least two important reasons. On the one hand, they are both outstanding instances of Lahiri’s economical and deceptively simple prose, which interestingly allows her to penetrate the deepest recesses of her characters’ inner landscapes. On the other, their heroines are transnationals who are so used to moving around the globe and coming into contact with other cultures that it would be difficult to think of them as belonging to any particular culture.<sup>68</sup> In “Only Goodness”, Sudha is a Bengali-American graduate student working on her second MA degree at the London School of Economics. Despite her successful scholarly career and her marriage with a British art historian, Roger Featherstone, whose main purpose in life is to please her, Sudha bears some guilty feelings about her younger brother’s drinking habits. She feels responsible because she was the one who inadvertently introduced Rahul to alcohol and she is aware that her parents will never admit that their son has a serious problem:

“What are you saying, Sudha?” her mother asked, sounding bothered. Her father did not put down his paper, but she sensed that he had stopped reading. Sudha knew that what she was about to say was something they expected and also viscerally feared, like disobedient children who are about to be slapped. That it was up to her to deliver the blow.

“I think Rahul might have a drinking problem.”

“Sudha, please,” her mother said. After a pause she added, “I gather everyone at American colleges drinks.” She spoke as if drinking were an undergraduate hobby, a phase one outgrew. (143)

Although Sudha makes great efforts to redirect her brother’s life during her visits to the U.S., it becomes increasingly clear that they are to no avail. Rahul drops out of school, meets an older, uneducated woman, makes a scene during Roger and Sudha’s reception party and, eventually, abandons the family home

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<sup>68</sup> A reference to what Appiah (2006) calls “cosmopolitanism” would seem, again, inevitable here. See also Bauman’s (1998:89-90) ideas about how immigrants and their offspring today have ceased to be “locally tied” and have entered the system of “global flows” in which it is quite impossible to develop a real sense of belonging.

without even leaving a note behind.<sup>69</sup> Still, when Sudha finally receives a letter from her brother a year later, she immediately accedes to invite him to meet his new nephew, Neel, in London. All goes surprisingly well during the week Rahul spends with her sister's family –he even grows very fond of the child–, but on the night before his return trip to the States, he is left alone with Neel and, after a while, drinks himself to a profound slumber with the baby still taking his bath in the tub. When Sudha and Roger arrive home and discover the situation, a terrible quarrel ensues between the two of them, at the end of which she finally reveals to her husband the long-silenced secret that is likely to make their marriage founder:

And somehow, in spite of how hard she was crying, she told him, about the very first time Rahul had come to visit her at Penn, and how he hadn't even liked beer, and then about all the cans they'd hidden over the years and how eventually it was no longer a game for him but a way of life, a way of life that had removed him from her family and ruined him. (171)

"Nobody's Business" is the only story in the book told from the point of view of a non-Indian person but, surprisingly enough, this does not change in any significant way the content and structure of the narrative. Paul, a PhD candidate preparing his English exams, and Heather, a Law student, are housemates in an apartment when the third room is rented to a young Bengali woman of thirty, Sangeeta, who immediately moves in with her few belongings. Although Sang is good-looking and smart, she has abandoned her doctorate at Harvard, and now works part time at a bookstore near the apartment. The fact that the three tenants share a single phone line is a bit of a problem because Sang is constantly called by prospective grooms that, the reader assumes, her parents have found for her.<sup>70</sup> After sometime, Paul learns that Sang has an Egyptian boyfriend, Farouk, with whom she seems to have a turbulent relation. Meanwhile, it becomes gradually clear that Paul is developing some special feelings for the young Bengali. At one point, when she is away in London visiting her sister, he goes into her room to drop a UPS package that had arrived for her:

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<sup>69</sup> As is the case with her treatment of other contemporary social diseases, Lahiri proves especially skilful and sensitive in representing the consequences that alcoholism usually has for the individual and his/her closest kin. Although we only get to see Rahul's perspective in the narrative through his behavior and dialogues, the author chooses just the right terms to capture his progressive decline and the kind of threat that this poses for his family.

<sup>70</sup> There are several stories in the collection in which the parents' interference with their offspring's marriage plans and choices is quite apparent. This being a traditional cultural practice in India, it is not, as mentioned earlier on, as if all traces of the old culture had been omitted from the book.

[...] A single panel of a white seersucker curtain was loosely cinched with a peach silk scarf that Sang sometimes knotted at her throat, causing the fabric of the curtain to gather in the shape of a slim hourglass. Paul untied the scarf, letting the curtain cover the windowpane. Without touching his face to the scarf, he smelled the perfume that lingered in its weave. He went to the futon and sat down, his legs extending along the out meal carpet. He took off his shoes and socks. On a wine crate next to the futon was a glass of water that had gathered bubbles, a small pot of Vaseline. He undid his belt buckle, but suddenly the desire left him, absent from his body just as she was absent from the room. He buckled his belt again, and then slowly he lifted the bedspread. The sheets were flannel, blue and white, a pattern of fleur-de-lis. (193)

While Sang is still in London, Paul receives a couple of phone calls from a woman called Deirdre who is convinced that Sang is Farouk's cousin. When Paul tells Deirdre the truth, the latter replies that she has just made love to Farouk on her staircase. Paul keeps the content of these conversations from Sang when she returns, but he does admit that Deirdre was crying over the phone one of the times. The protagonist does not believe Paul's story about this strange woman and Paul is so outraged by her mistrust that he invites her to eavesdrop over his next conversation with Deirdre:

"Tell her about me and Farouk. She deserves to know. It sounds like you're a good friend of hers."

Deirdre hung up, and for a long time Paul and Sang sat there, listening to the silence. He had cleared himself with Sang, and yet he felt no relief, no vindication. Eventually, Sang hung up her phone and stood up, slowly, but made no further movements. She looked sealed off from things, holding herself as if she still needed to be perfectly stealthy, as if the slightest sound or gesture would betray her presence. (211)

As is the case in many of the other tales in the collection, it is difficult to figure out who is to take the blame for the sadness and hard feelings that dominate the final part of the story:<sup>71</sup> Is it Sang's blind innocence, Paul's interference with someone else's business, Farouk's duplicity or is it Deirdre's vengeful behavior? Todaro (2008) has admitted that this is not an easy puzzle to solve because "Lahiri's story stock is rife with characters that are larger than the Bengali immigration experience, experiences that are larger than mere discontent." So many different vectors seem to intersect in her extremely diverse gallery of characters that it is quite impossible to determine where the sources of their problems lie. It is clear, anyway, that only a very residual part of the difficulties met by most of her characters could be assigned to the

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<sup>71</sup> Karim (2006) and others have maintained that Lahiri's stories are typically open-ended and are "never bent on illustrating any thesis."

influence of their parents' original culture or to their expectations about the kind of people that their sons and daughters should become.

To conclude, the three overlapping stories that close the volume simply confirm most of the arguments I have presented throughout my discussion above. Although Lahiri has recognized in interviews that she began to think of the stories in "Hema and Kaushik" while she was still writing *The Namesake* (see Bolonik 2008:35), it is evident that her preferences and interests as a writer were already drifting in the direction described in this article; that is, towards more global and complex themes, and characters who are not so deeply influenced by their migratory experience. It is true that the protagonists of this trio of interconnected narratives are the two only children of two competing migrant families, who are initially thrown together by their mothers' friendship. Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident that the author is not so much interested in any of the obstacles they may face in adapting to the lifestyle in America but, rather, in the intra- and inter-family dynamics. In Schillinger's (2008) opinion, "the generational conflicts Lahiri depicts cut across national lines; the waves of admiration, competition and criticism that flow between the two families could occur between the Smiths and the Taylors in any suburban town." Hema and Kaushik first meet as teenagers when the boy's family come to stay with the girl's while they find a suitable house in the Boston suburbs. Hema falls secretly in love with the older Kaushik, aged 16, but he seems mostly absent-minded and pays little attention to her schoolgirl antics. Hema's parents also complain that the Choudhuris appear to have changed during their seven-year sojourn in India. But the reason for Kaushik's sulkiness and his parents' unfriendliness is finally revealed:

[...] "She's [Kaushik's mother] been seeing a new doctor at Mass General. That's where my father often takes her when they say they're going to see houses. She's going to have surgery in the spring, but it's only to buy her a little more time. She doesn't want anyone here to know. Not until the end."

The information fell between us, as shocking as if you'd struck me in the face, and I began to cry. At first the tears fell silently, sliding over my nearly frozen face, but then I started sobbing, becoming ugly in front of you, my nose running in the cold, my eyes turning red. (250)

Kaushik's mother's terminal cancer explains, of course, their bizarre behavior before and makes Hema realize how unfair her parents had been in their judgments.

The second story in this section, "Year's End", takes place five years later and focuses mostly on Kaushik's grief for her mother's death, which is further aggravated by his father's prompt marriage with a much younger Indian widow, Chitra, who is the mother of two daughters. Somehow unfairly, again, Kaushik

pours his lingering pain and simmering fury on the two young girls who, predictably, fail to understand their stepbrother's attack of hysteria when they come across a box with his mother's photos. While one could argue that the cultural distance between the two young girls and their American brother, now a junior in Swarthmore, may contribute in a way to the misunderstanding, it is evident that the source of the problem needs to be sought in the bleak mood that has taken possession of Kaushik's temperament since his mother's demise:

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I said now.

Rupa looked at me, her dark eyes flashing, and Piu began to cry. I walked into the room and picked up the pictures, putting them face down on my old dresser. Then I grabbed Rupa by the shoulders from where she sat crouched on the floor, shaking her forcefully. Her body had gone limp, her thin legs wobbling in their cabled black tights. I wanted to throw her against the wall, but instead I managed to direct her to the folding cot and forced her to sit, knowing that I was squeezing too hard. "Tell me, where did you find these?" I demanded, just inches from her face. (286)

After this spontaneous and rather violent reaction, Kaushik decides to leave his father's place without even saying goodbye—in fact, he admits that he had been looking for an excuse to run away for days. He spends over a week driving up the New England coast to the Canadian border and back across quite desolate winter landscapes, but somehow his pain is relieved by the silence and solitude: "Somewhere during that time the year ended; I was aware of it thanks only to a free shot of whiskey I received one night in a bar. I was certain that if my mother had lived to visit that part of the world, she would have persuaded my father to buy her one of the hundred homes I passed, overlooking the open sea, many occupying islands all to themselves" (290). I do not think one needs to stretch one's imagination very much to see Kaushik's escapade as a ramification of so many other journeys undertaken by literary heroes in which they go in search of themselves.

The closing story in the book, "Going Ashore", could be read as an appropriate gloss on the other tales included in the collection. To begin with, by now Kaushik and Hema have become these transnational citizens of the world who would apparently feel as comfortable in Boston as in Bombay—as a matter of fact the story takes place in Rome. Hema has become a Latin scholar and Kaushik a well-known photojournalist constantly on the run. Like most of the other characters in the book, they've gone through some turbulent relationships and are trying hard to heal their wounds.<sup>72</sup> However, whether the choices they

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<sup>72</sup> Todaro (2008) observes that Lahiri's characters usually pay a rather high psychic toll because they are pushed to navigate difficult seas in which they need to worry about different cultural traditions, types of families, gender relations, class ascriptions, etc.



are making are the adequate ones is far from clear: Hema has opted for a traditional, arranged marriage that will hopefully provide her with a sense of security and direction; Kaushik is going to Hong Kong to take a less hazardous and more comfortable job as an editor. It is then that, against all odds, their paths cross briefly again in Rome: “The woman looked up, confused, and he realized, in spite of her dark hair and fitted leather coat, that she was not Italian. That in fact she was Indian. That he needn’t have used the polite form in addressing her, that her face was one he’d known” (310). For a few days, they get fully engrossed in a passionate and intense love affair. They also take trips to some of the beautiful sites that Hema needs to visit for her research on the Etruscans. Kaushik, naturally, takes some unforgettable pictures. However, the reader knows by now that it is naive to expect a happy ending from a Lahiri story. Lives so human and complicated cannot easily be wrapped up like a fairy-tale. Kaushik does propose to Hema to follow him in his new adventure but, wisely or unwisely, she prefers the safety of her own plans, and lets him go to meet his death a few days later on a paradisiacal beach north of Khao Lak, in Thailand.

#### 4. CLOSING REMARKS

The primary aim of this article has been to show how Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest collection of short stories leaves behind in several significant ways some of the themes that had engaged her interest in her earlier works of fiction, i.e., cultural clashes, identity questions, and a sense of displacement. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, on the other hand, the second-generation Bengali immigrants that she chooses to portray have substantially assimilated to the mainstream culture and prove to be concerned with the issues that would trouble any other American: illness, guilty feelings, alcoholism, intergenerational tensions, loneliness, etc. We have observed that, most often via their parents’ influence, these individuals still need to occasionally negotiate the kind of problems that their hyphenated identities are bound to pose. Nevertheless, as Grossman (2008) and other reviewers rightly noted, her characters are becoming more and more like transnational beings for whom land of origin and place of residence are just temporary accidents in their life that may only affect their destiny very slightly.

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